Book Review: Literary Gaming by Astrid Ensslin

Clark, Lynda

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In his 2009 DiGRA keynote speech, "Videogames are a Mess," Ian Bogost discusses the need for videogame scholars to move away from simplistic, catchall analysis, to eschew the desire to answer the oft-repeated question "What is a game?" and, instead, to embrace the "mess" of videogames and to develop more appropriate approaches. He notes that thinking in such a way would "[force] us to ask more specific questions about particular analytical situations." Like Bogost, Astrid Ensslin recognizes the need for cross-pollination between games and other disciplines (in this case more traditional literary forms) and seeks to provide an adaptable framework to analyze the hybrids that arise from this fusion. In *Literary Gaming* in general, and her "literary-ludic spectrum and functional ludostylistics toolbox" (43ff) in particular, Ensslin provides a template for the types of questions we should be asking in this context and demonstrates how they may be applied across a variety of literary-ludic hybrid works.

Ensslin divides her study into two sections, a concise theoretical overview and an extensive practical demonstration. In Chapter One, Ensslin shows the centuries-long academic relationship between games and literature with a comprehensive range of relevant titles from those examining the broadly playful (such as Peter Blake's 1974 study of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass)* to those considering the specifically ludic (such as Brian Edwards's 1998 *Theories of Play and Postmodern Fiction*). Following this broad history of concepts of play in literature, Ensslin gradually tightens her focus from ludicity, in general, in Chapter Two, to specific examples of ludic literature and modes of literary gaming, in Chapter Three. Specifically avoiding "games" as a term because of its problematic identity crisis, Ensslin opts instead for the less contested "gaming."

One of this book's principal claims is that, "[l]iterary gaming strategies involve a much wider range of literacies as well as the willingness to approach a digital artifact with a different mindset each time we start play-reading it afresh" (40), and that this willingness to adopt multiple interpretative strategies must also be applied to academic approaches to gaming. This may be a simple concept, but one that has yet to be successfully demonstrated in a workable manner. The second section of the book seeks to do just that and is, therefore, far longer than the first. A wealth of examples is given in each of Ensslin's categories of "literary-ludic" (43ff) production (kinetic digital literature, code works, generative literature, literary 3D environments, hypertexts/hypermedia, interactive fiction/drama, poetry games, literary auteur games, and quasi-literary games), taking these concepts out of the abstract realm of conceptual inquiry and positioning them in the real world of literary and artistic production.

Similarly, the critical framework that Ensslin adopts—what she terms "functional ludostylistics" (53)—is enacted through each chapter's consideration of specific texts. In Chapter Four, ludic hypertext is examined via Deena Larsen's 2002 interactive flash poem *Firefly,* considering a range of other literary-ludic works before turning to Robert Kendall's 2001-2008 interactive detective poem, *Clues.* Chapter Five engages more substantially with ludic work by exploring the heuristic ergodicity of Serge Bouchardon's and Vincent Volckart's 2010 *Loss of Grasp.* Ensslin's study then proceeds to develop a more complex analytic methodology, and to address more elaborately ludic material before turning, in

Chapter Nine, to the more traditionally "game-like" 2009 horror game, *The Path.* Readers are themselves exposed to an almost heuristic-ergodic experience as Ensslin systematically introduces new concepts and techniques, which become interconnected as the book progresses, allowing it and its readers and practitioners to arrive at increasingly complex observations and arguments.

Naturally, there are likely to be cases where different scholars would position the same games differently on the spectrum that Ensslin identifies, and, indeed, she acknowledges the likelihood of such differences in Chapter Ten, which serves as the conclusion of this book. However, the critical framework that Ensslin develops provides an important contribution to debates about the ludological, narratological, and literary qualities of games. One significant aspect of this book is that it demonstrates considerable common ground between what are often treated as disparate objects of study. The spectrum that Ensslin sets out is, by her own admission, consciously "simultaneously more and less inclusive" than what Mela Kocher terms the "ludoliterary cycle" (50); it is innovative and compelling because it has the potential to be precisely as inclusive or exclusive as its user requires. While Ensslin chooses to focus on works that fulfil the criteria of being both digital and literary in her study, traditional print (non-digital) ergodic literature or commercial narrative (non-literary) games could just as easily be examined at the extreme ends of the literary-ludic spectrum as those items that actually appear on it.

By developing functional ludostylistics as a method for reading ludic literature, Ensslin provides future generations of ludological and narratological scholars (as well as those who fall between these categories) with the necessary tools to compare diverse examples of their respective forms and recognize the need to attend to the particular mechanisms and/or narrative devices that shape them.

Lynda Clark, Nottingham Trent University, U.K.

Works Cited

Bogost, Ian. *Videogames are a Mess. Bogost.com.* Ian Bogost, 3 Sept. 2009. Web. 27 May 2015.